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KEVIN CLARK

James Dickey at Florida

—1973

PERFORMANCE

The first time I saw James Dickey
He stood at the head of the class, unzipped
His wetsuit jacket, then announced
In surplus Buckhead slur,
You don't fuck around with poetry.
Don Armstrong smiled so still

No one saw him. Bridget's perm sank.
When you're masturbating, he said,
There's that feeling just before you come...
—*That's poetry.* Donna's lovely fingers
Twirled still beneath her throat.
You'd think my history of bad acid

Would have readied me, but
I too churned in the vortex. Before
Deliverance, he'd been teaching
At Bread Loaf where Auden had only
Five students. Wystan, ol' friend,
He asked, How is it you have so few

And I so many? Auden told him
He'd ask a simple question, then dismiss
Those who answered wrong.
—Now he'd ask us the same:
Why do you write poetry?
I fell and froze. Two weeks back

I'd read Auden's Q-and-A.
—I'm born to. —I have something to say.
—It's in the blood. Down the row
They came, each wrong answer
Stung by the clipped dismissal:
You'd be out of the class. *You'd* be out. *You*.

Do I give the right response and blow
His cover? As if miraculous light
Poured up from the lacquered desk
To save me, he nodded past my chair.
Soon, someone hemmed
Auden's dull trimeter:

I like to play with words.
Then, without warning, he staged
A battle of accents. First
The movie's cracker sheriff
Barks *he'd* written "Dueling Banjos."
Then Brando's puffed Don Vito throats:

I said, You don't fuck around with poetry.
That's when the dueling personas
Waged a litany of suicidal proofs:
Thomas is gone. Jarrell is gone.
Roethke is gone. Plath. Berryman.
A pause came on like bourbon—

And as the last lean trick amazed us,
Armstrong's seat sat empty:
Lowell, he said, will be the next to go.
—Shadows shimmered in the margins,
But we hung rapt still. Quiet
Bled us pale. One after another,

He gripped us each in a long scowl,
Then dropped his gaze toward
The waxed, fluorescent grave
Of the seminar room. I rode
My heart down a sink hole.
He walked out, left himself for dead.

ENGINE

Weeks later backlit by The Millhopper's bar lights Bridget's floating hair
As promise and aesthetic our second beer entering the veins
Of her story: how the giant poet pulled her without shame to the pool table
Bourbon no water no lyric just fame how he asked her quick like that
And when she laughed him off in the first neon mist of thinking
This is a comic ride he's joking he turned without ceremony
To the grad student from Psych then the blonde bartender then
Donna sitting with her professor boyfriend when at last he hulked alone
To a barstool, reciting stories to the mirror until he rose
And the door opened for his dark walk home Bridget said his grip
Locked her arm with such soft metal amazing focus, she said,
Elemental —detached, corrected Donna —a pilot, I'm thinking now,
Trying to out climb the flak the concussive strobe the will to rise
Above an illimitable sky I'd wanted the mysteries the poems

The sex Bridget's breath in my hair not just the life, but
The orbital star-strewn realm to which each line aspires that year
I mimicked his fast, hunter's yawp but in truth I'd dreamed a different
Romance a woman as conduit and twin the complementary vocable
That completes the code moves the aerie gears of the last lock
Until we've crossed past bliss itself into the weightless lyric union
At the heart of poetry —didn't we all? Even those young professors
Of the South married before the hallucinatory countercultural acids
Had bleached away the iambs the dates the seven ambiguities the cramped
Hieroglyphs scrawled over their fugitive drafts each premature father

On a track I'd come to hope for all lined up against the back wall
Of the class three weeks later drawn to spectacle to history

And region When in a brooding globe of spirits the poet hauled himself
Into his seat before the dark-haired visitor not gravitas but hell-to-pay
In his eyes on his right hand an oversized turquoise Thunderbird ring—
He never looked at his mistress from the Carolinas, his “secretary”
Handing out our copied poems, a thin smile bobbing its incessant Yes
Donna's broken music first her sweet-dreams mimicry of Mr. Henry's songs
Undoing the poet whose mouth curled and snapped its No then snarled
How bad this first line read— and even then before the primacy
Of what's-to-come you could see in his face the right engine sputter
The words fail then: the maw opened like a hole in the sky then:
We heard the woman speak into the silence Oh, she doesn't know,
She thinks it's a good line and how the poet turned to stare a bare
Half second how the right hand lifted how the woman's cheek
Went white then purpled after the backhand struck— I can still track

His hand its open caesura the quick mid-flight hesitation in the old
Parlance, he'd pulled his punch— a poem twisting nose-down
In freefall each flexed line gone flaccid the old oceanic sky breaking
Open like cowardice —or the last silk shreds of what's right
Snapped off at last...

He spun Donna's poem to the floor, said
He didn't want to do more *student* poetry— the dark-haired woman
Quiet as a grave, eyes brimming, a bird rising in red on her face—
When a grad student in Lit handed him an open book asked if he'd read
One of his poems and so he looked down upon the story
Of the young man who leaves his motorcycle roadside convoys
Through the junkyard to some grandmother's Pierce Arrow—
While stunned and shot we actually listened not one of us had risen
In protest— the narrator held and held to Doris Holbrook
With terrific speed the poet's voice as taut as the string-triggered 12-gauge
The girl's father held in wait for him— that gun compelling

The sort of lust that drives a boy like this who soon leaves Doris Holbrook
As she scrambles with car parts back to her old man... —to this day
I can hear the poet's throat scratching its pitch-perfect rasp toward closure
The boy on his engine the poet wild to be wreckage he's already become
And the rest of us: virgin players each desk edge scoring our bloodless hands